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ABSTRACT

Geared toward librarians who frequently work with faculty and graduate students, this paper summarizes the experience of the library at the University of Southern California in organizing and conducting several subject specific workshops on using the Internet as a research medium. It examines the practical issues on how to approach the task of teaching researchers something new and explores the more theoretical question of whether such workshops afford a new collaborative environment between librarians and specialists in particular disciplines. Observations from the workshops are provided. Conclusions include: (1) intellectual property issues play an important role in a researcher's decision to publish their work on the Internet; (2) the instability of Internet resources is a concern; (3) many researchers are mainly interested in automating some of their research, but not in other opportunities on the Internet; (4) many people see the curricular potential of the Internet--as a 24-hour source for traditional and non-traditional resources and for the possibility of altering and revitalizing courses; and (5) in non-traditional research areas, or areas susceptible to technological changes, there may be an interest in developing electronic libraries to support the changing curriculum. (Author/SWC)

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An Embarrassment of Riches

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Abstract

This paper is geared towards librarians who frequently work with faculty and graduate students, and will summarize our experience in organizing and conducting several subject specific workshops on using the Internet as a research medium. It will examine the practical issues on how to approach the task of teaching researchers something new and the more theoretical question on whether such workshops afford a new collaborative environment between librarians and specialists in particular disciplines. How do we negotiate the hype created by the rapid accessibility to resources on the Internet and the conservatism often present in academic settings? Does the ready availability of the Internet on many academic campuses affect the relationship between the librarian and the researcher? And finally, is this all a great big hype, masquerading as research, which detracts us from doing our professional work?

Discussion

The title of this paper comes from a 1987 book by the Harvard cultural historian Simon Schama, which deals with the Dutch culture in the Golden Age. I re-used the title because in my mind it metaphorically stands for the Internet experience.

The Dutch, only relatively recently liberated from the Spanish rule, had to invent themselves a republic. The thesis of Schama's book is essentially that the Dutch in the seventeenth century suffered economically and culturally from an "anxiety of superabundance." I do not know if I am stretching the metaphor too far, but anyone who had to help a patron complaining that they do not know where to start looking on the Internet because there is so much there, yet there is no starting point, might sympathize with those suffering from an anxiety of superabundance. And the Internet keeps reinventing itself, while being shaped by the government, educational institutions, and the commercial likes of Bill Gates and others.

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Personally, I see another affinity between the Schama book and the Internet. I didn't read the entire book (it is close to 700 pages). Not because I was not interested in the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. But because I was constrained by time, and thus had to pick only those parts which for a particular reason interested me more. Which is the way I and many others use the Internet - I only go to the parts that interest me most, the rest might as well not exist. This is probably close to the actual way many people do research - they do not keep track of everything in a field, but only of a chosen number of topics, and build their store of knowledge incrementally.

One of the big all time issues for public service librarians has been how to harness these spotty interests of researchers into meaningful collection development, reference, and instructional processes. At USC we have been trying to answer the question whether the Internet can provide a research medium. I am well aware that our world is changing rapidly, and what may be true today may not be true in a year (as an aside, I do not think that the world is changing rapidly in a very radical manner, although I will concede that there are annual incremental shifts, but not necessarily changes). Yet, I think that my tentative conclusions might interest some of you.

In Spring and Fall of 1996 several colleagues of mine conducted research oriented, subject specific Internet seminars for various social sciences and humanities departments at USC. For that purpose, a series of subject-related web sites were put together, which are on my department's teaching page (under Research Seminars and Workshops). In some cases, the departments approached a librarian for a demonstration of research quality sites on the Internet; in other cases, the librarian did outreach to departments and disciplines, and arranged for demonstrations. In those cases when the teaching department was the instigator, attendance was high - usually the chairperson used any means possible to publicize and coax faculty and students to attend. In the cases where the librarian was the instigator of the seminar, attendance was usually quite low. Success, however, cannot always be measured in quantity. The seminars were publicized through fliers to departments, in the libraries, and through a campus-wide brochure called Adventures in Information, which lists library and University Computing Services drop-in sessions on uses of computers for various purposes.

I was involved very little in the actual teaching of the seminars. I came to most of them to observe the interaction between the librarian and the researchers, and to see whether the time investment was worthwhile. I should say that the time investment in creating an Internet-based subject specific seminar is great. In addition to investing a lot of time into pulling together relevant sources in an intelligent package, the librarian has to prepare for possible additional demands which may be generated by such a seminar. Here is a possible scenario: a member of the teaching faculty may come to a librarian after a seminar and say "I was really interested in what you showed. I've been thinking about redoing one of my undergraduate (or graduate) courses, and your demonstration gave me some ideas. Would you like to work with me in revamping it..." (and we can go from there). Several examples where teaching faculty and a librarian got involved in experimenting with a course are: Disraeli and the Purchase of the Suez Canal, a graduate course, and Psychology 100: Psychology and Human Behavior, an undergraduate course.

As I mentioned earlier, web page was created for each seminar, which acted as a center for a substantive list of Internet resources covering the variety of sub-subjects taught and researched in each department. The seminars usually involved showing select Internet

resources and a discussion of issues of quality and quantity of resources on the Internet, lack of standards, issues of intellectual property, and questions of viability of electronic scholarly publishing endeavors given the current standards of publishing within academia (which affect tenure decisions, etc.)

These are some of my observations on what transpired:

1. Mechanical - People did not necessarily understand how to navigate a particular Internet browser (in our case Netscape), and did not always understand how to search the Internet. Presumably this problem would diminish in time...

2. Curricular - There is a lot of basic cultural information on the Internet. For example, one could find many classical texts in that medium. It is my observation that although many in the humanities were excited about finding these texts, they gauged the usefulness of ready availability of such texts (such as Machiavelli's the Prince, the Analects of Confucius, the Koran, etc.) in curricular terms only. These texts can be assigned to undergraduates (as they always are), but now there will be no excuses not to read the text because it could not be acquired or found in the library - it's on the Internet. However, I have not yet heard anyone say that these texts were useful for research purposes. And usually they are not, because of unknown editions, unknown editorial work, etc.

3. Research - Many wanted to know how they could replicate on the Internet the research they do through other means. For example, can a person doing research on 18th century English equestrian paintings find on the Internet the stuff that they find in libraries, but in full text and image? In some cases they might, but generally, there are no parallels between traditional library and subject catalogs and the Internet in very specialized research areas.

4. Those who do field research or who collect data, find the Internet somewhat useful. Not necessarily because there is a lot of field data there, but because through the Internet one can contact agencies and institutions which gather that type of information. Generally, the Internet has made it easier for people to contact researchers or institutions and pose extensive questions.

5. Those who are looking at non-traditional subject areas may find resources of interest on the Internet. Many of these resources do not fit the traditional conception of what can be published on paper, but are available on the Internet, since it acts as an alternative publishing and communication medium.

6. Because researchers work on specific projects, not every research site on the Internet is of interest. Librarians may not always easily know what is useful without engaging in a dialog with the researchers. It was interesting to hear Renaissance scholars at one of the sessions reject the Labyrinth web site as being of little interest, yet finding more specific projects which pull together specialized information from a diverse range of sources, such as THAIS: 1200 Years of Italian Sculpture of more interest (although THAIS is not very well developed yet, and has many gaps).

7. Another example of a very specialized scholarly project is a Nabokov site called Zembla - The Nabokov Butterfly Net. It is a kind of a bibliography or catalog of topics pertaining to Nabokov, which includes original content. It is used by graduate students and faculty as a springboard for further research, although potentially it contains a finite

amount of information. I would argue that unlike a print bibliography which is not always available in one's library, this site is readily available to anyone with access to the web. And it offers a different kind of information to scholars than a traditional bibliography. Lastly, it provides collaborative space. I wonder whether sites such as this will shift the scholarly paradigms for humanities research from individual to group endeavors.

Conclusions and wither the librarian?

1. Intellectual property issues play an important role in researcher's decision on whether the Internet may apply to their own research (particularly the publishing aspect of it). This problem may take quite a while to work out, and I suspect that the debate will very likely be dominated by commercial interests (although it is possible that scholarly societies will take it upon themselves to resolve it).

2. Instability of Internet resources is another concern. Even sites that are backed by universities may disappear if they run out of funding. Who puts up a site is a concern to researchers, but not necessarily a paramount one yet.

3. As mentioned earlier, there were many researchers who simply wanted to automate some of the research they already do. When the Internet did not provide that opportunity it proved of little interest to them. On the other hand, many indexes and long used resources are being made available on the Internet or through some sort of an electronic network - and that was of interest. And researchers do prefer to have the indexes and potentially the actual material they need at their desk-tops. The question is whether they would want to participate in creating the actual electronic resources which they and their colleagues could then use. The answer is tricky. For those faculty who are working on tenure, there are few benefits of such projects, unless perhaps a project received major funding and was universally seen to be of paramount importance to research. Some of those who have tenure are potentially interested in creating electronic collections. This is an area where librarians may play a collaborative role either identifying unique collections to digitize, or working with faculty who have field data on digitizing, organizing, and delivering it. However, for almost all of us, as for the teaching faculty, unless our job descriptions radically change, such work will constitute a tremendous add-on to what we are already expected to do. And we are not always sure whether such work has the support of our institution or organization.

4. Many people see the curricular potential of the Internet - direct electronic interaction among students and the instructor, 24 hour availability of many traditional and some non-traditional resources, the possibility of altering and revitalizing courses. This has appeal to many junior faculty and some graduate students, and this is another area where they might turn to us. I do not think that traditionally librarians have been much involved in disciplinary curriculum development, and to be involved is very compelling. Not only can we participate in the teaching of young minds, we can shape some of that teaching, particularly with regard to "doing research" (whatever that means in a disciplinary context). Still, this is another tremendous add-on to our work.

5. In non-traditional research areas, or in areas that are susceptible to technological changes (for example, the fields of communications and journalism), there may be an interest in developing electronic libraries to support the changing curriculum. This is our traditional area, but it may not be ours for long. Collecting and custom - classifying already existing electronic resources can be done by almost anyone with a computer and a

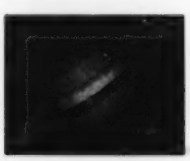
modem, and it may be attractive for departments to engage in this endeavor on their own without intermediaries. This, in fact, is already being done.

So what is happening in our case? There are several faculty who are working with librarians on projects of curricular and research interest, and who came to us as a result of the seminars. These few endeavors are very time consuming, at least for the librarians, and we do not know what the actual outcome will be, and whether it will stay in the library. From a purely economic view, these few endeavors are expensive, from a more traditional library perspective, they take us away from what is still very much needed - reference work, collection development, etc. At this point, I think there is one benefit, although it may sound disappointing to many of you - on my campus librarians (not just in my department) are participants in changing the discourse about the meaning of curriculum and research in an academic setting. This is because we so heavily invested ourselves into thinking constructively about technology and its applications. Being very much an academic, I came up with a name for this constructive thinking - it is called "beyond PsycLIT" (or MLA, or Sociofile). To put it differently, now that we have delivered the basic scholarly indexes to people's desktops, it is time to start figuring out how applicable they are to the research process. And if they aren't always applicable (which they aren't) than what is?

The knowledge of many researchers, is built incrementally and gradually, usually from known sources. They get to know who is doing what in a particular field, and maintain personal files on that. The Internet is too everywhere all at once, and too commercial to neatly fit into this building of knowledge.

Generally, faculty do not feel that the Internet may give them what they need. Graduate students are more receptive, and may be cultivated as future contributors to the Internet. It is true that there are many obstacles to the Internet becoming a more reliable research medium - academic publishing is still very much a closed, paper-bound endeavor; the Internet is much more amenable to commercial ventures than to scholarly ones, and it is too unstable a medium. Yet I think that projects such as the E-text center at University of Virginia, the rethinking of various scientific associations of the issue of publishing and intellectual property, and successive generations of graduate students will slowly shift some of the focus of the medium into the research direction.

To leap back in history - the printing press was invented 500 years ago, and made it easier to disseminate the written word (if one had access to a press). Written word then did not have the same importance we attach to it today, especially since so much of what was printed was in the devalued "vulgar languages" and not in Latin. However, the printed word lived to become our cultural anchor. There are some parallels to be drawn with the Internet today. I do think librarians are positioned well to help shape the academic discourse about electronic information. The meaning of such information will, of course, go beyond us.



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